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Neglected Arabia



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THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND

# Neglected Arabia



Missionary Letters and News

published quarterly by

The Arabian Mission



Number forty-Six, April to June, 1903

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# Missionary Letters and News from Arabia.

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April-June, 1903.

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## FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

MISS ELIZABETH G. DE PREE.

The long voyage from America to Arabia gradually prepares one for new and strange things. On leaving England one bids farewell to real civilization, and slowly becomes accustomed to all kinds of odd sights. I have sometimes wondered how it would seem if one could step right out of America into Bahrein. Out of the principal business street of one of our American cities, for instance, into the Bahrein bazaar, or "sook" as it is called here. This consists of a number of narrow lanes, with stalls or booths on either side. These are from eight to ten feet square, and on the floor of each (which is about two feet above the ground, and also serves as counter), sits the owner, ready to charge any foreigner who happens along double the value of whatever he may wish to purchase. This seems to be a sort of unwritten rule, and consequently the foreigners let trustworthy natives do most of their purchasing for them.

The houses, which are built of stone and plaster, and look more like foundations than houses, and the narrow streets, some scarcely four feet wide, impress one strangely at first. Few of the houses have windows, and the little date-stick huts in which the poorer class natives live have just one door. They are dark and dingy, and like their occupants, exceedingly dirty. Some of the people are fairly well dressed, but the majority are ragged and unkempt. They are rather goodnatured, and very inquisitive; not hesitating in the least to ask all sorts of questions and to inspect one's clothing almost from head to foot. If they see anything that especially pleases them, they ask for it.

A great many of the women wear black cloth masks, which make them look hideous. They think it strange that we go about without covering our heads and faces. When we tell them that in our country it is not the custom, they say "Ajeeb." That is a common expression of surprise. One hears it many times a day. If we expressed our surprise as readily as they, we would use it quite as often, for many of their customs and habits are not only entirely different from ours, but such as we cannot help but wonder at.

There is a spring near the hospital, where the women come to wash their clothes. They bring the skins in which they carry their drinking water with them, and after the washing is finished these skins are filled from this same water. I think you will feel inclined to say "Ajeeb" at this.

One day I went with Miss Lutton to visit some of the houses, and a woman asked us to go with her to see a bride who was in the next house. This bride was a girl of thirteen, and a very strange sight indeed. Her hair was braided in twelve or more braids, with huge brass bangles at the ends of those which hung over her forehead and down the sides of her face. She also had on a necklace of these bangles and her fingers were covered with heavy rings. Her dress I do not remember very well, but I think it had what seems to be the favorite combination of colors—green, purple, orange and magenta. The walls of the room were hung with mirrors, and the floor was covered with gay rugs, and cushions.

The Arabs think very little of one who does not know Arabic and so I am not considered of much use. They say to each other, "She does not understand," or "She does not know." I often hear that at the hospital. They have great confidence in Mrs. Thoms and Mrs. Zwemer.

What impressed me most the first time I went to the hospital was that I had come to a place where workers were very much needed. There were about forty women, sitting on the floor, bare-footed, very dirty, and holding still dirtier babies. Mrs. Zwemer read and talked to them as she does every morning before the regular dispensary work begins. The work is intensely interesting, but it seems almost impossible to make them see the



necessity of cleanliness. They like spots and stains even in medicine. Of all our medicines, tincture of iodine is their favorite, and anyone who can have a sore spot painted with iodine is quite happy.

You will understand that we miss Mrs. Thoms greatly, for we are now without a lady physician. A few days ago Mrs. Zwemer wished to have Dr. Thoms see one of the women patients, but the woman was very indignant. She pulled her mask over her face, and ran away, scolding as she went along. Another woman ran after her and brought her back on condition that the man doctor should not see her.

We are all hoping that a lady physician will be sent to us soon, so that the work may not suffer for lack of workers.

“The harvest truly is great and the laborers are few. Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that he may send forth laborers into his harvest.”

## THE PROGRESS OF THREE PILGRIMS.

REV. S. M. ZWEMER, D. D.

Islam has so strong a grip on the mind and conscience and so prejudices its votaries against the Gospel that it is generally a long struggle from darkness to daylight. The soil is hard and cold so that the seed lingers long before it germinates. Perhaps the story of three moslems, with whom I had conversation during the past few weeks, will illustrate the above truth and awaken more earnest and definite prayer for them and others like them.

Ameen, the colporteur, and I met M—— on the British India steamer on our way back from a tour to the Oman coast. He was traveling in company with several wealthy Moslems from India to Kerbela as the private secretary of one of them. Born in Tripoli, Syria, he had seen much of the world, and was a man of culture and learning, but withal so modest in his bearing and so polite to us even after he knew we were missionaries that we ventured to buttonhole him.

To our surprise and delight he told us something of his pilgrimage in search of the truth. How he had long been weary of orthodox Islam and had sought refuge in moslem philosophy and mysticism. He came in contact with the Jesuits of Syria, but their teaching perplexed him. He had read the Bible but his great difficulty was to see the need of the Atonement. Why could God not forgive sin without the death of His Son? How



DR. ZWEMER AND AMEEN ON THE ROAD TO OMAN.

was salvation possible to the prophets before Christ's birth if the New Testament statement is true that "there is salvation in no other?" What was the eternal fate of all pious moslems who had died and never seen the Gospel or heard it?

Such were some of the questions we tried to answer for him, seated in the starlight on the upper deck of the overcrowded S. S. Chindwara. Only two days did we spend together but it was

good to see how our friend *devoured* chapters like Isaiah 53d and Ps. 22 and Rom. 3d and then came to tell us how new light had dawned on him. He joined us in prayer ; he asked us to pray for him ; he purchased books ; the ship took him onward to Busrah and we will probably never see him again. Yet I believe he is bound for the Celestial City although on a pilgrimage to Kerbela and the tombs of moslem saints.

At Lingah, on our way back in native-boat from Debai, we waited a few days for the steamer and in wandering through the bazaar I met a man whose face seemed familiar. He greeted me cordially and reminded me that more than eight years ago he used to come and talk with Mr. Cantine and myself at Busrah. He was familiar with the Scriptures and said that he had wandered about a bit since we last met. In India he had received instruction from one of the missionaries and, as he expressed it, "only barely escaped being baptised." He is one of the traveling doctors of the Orient and his shop and appearance proved the truth of the adage that "a rolling stone gathers no moss." Yet here he was, in the midst of moslems, with his heart believing and afraid to confess Christ openly. Judged by the stern standard of out-and-out loyalty he is but a bruised reed and a smoking wick. But by prayer and patience such may become pillars for God's temple and burning and shining lights to those around them. We have opened correspondence and Ameen has great hopes for the man. In his last letter he calls himself the bond servant of Christ.

Ibn Abraham (whose first name we omit for obvious reasons) is no longer a moslem. On Sunday, April 19th, he confessed Christ and was baptised in the mission-house at our afternoon service. The night before he came near being baptised in his own blood, as his two brothers attempted to kill him. He fled for his life and remained in our house until he escaped on a steamer. For over three years past we counted him an inquirer, although we were often disappointed in him because he was so afraid of men, especially of his own family. He is known to be a Christian by his neighbors and companions, nor does he mind *their* petty persecutions. But his father has property and position, and the disgrace that would come to the family in moslem society if it

were blazed abroad that their son had forsaken Islam is felt keenly by his brothers, and, not strange to say, even by the young man himself. He loves his mother and she loves him dearly. Only his being homesick for her drove him back to Bahrein after he had escaped his brothers' violence. One cannot explain all the circumstances now, but it is hard, very hard for a moslem convert even under the British flag, to forsake his former religion and make a bold stand for Christ.

This young man is also an example of how slowly faith ripens and bears fruit. When we first came to Bahrein he used to buy cheap gospels to tear them up and often joined other lads in abusing our book-sellers ! Then he began to read in secret and stumble over the difficulties of the gospel narrative. For a whole year he was taught, at fit and secret opportunities, by one of our helpers, and then he kept his books in the grocer's shop which he tended, afraid to read them at home. Later on he attended our Sunday services, often by stealth ; and step by step he grew in grace and in knowledge. He was the most sincere and open-hearted inquirer I have ever met and we have great hopes that the time will soon come when the candle will burn the bushel and shine on the candlestick.

The baptism of this Nicodemus was not only an occasion of joy to us all but has given our native helpers and ourselves new faith to plough in hope and to sow beside all waters. "Behold the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth and hath long patience for it until he receive the early and the latter rain. Be ye also patient."

## THE PLAGUE AT BAHREIN.

DR. SHARON J. THOMS.

We were in the midst of a small-pox epidemic a few months ago, then diptheria broke out, and a few days later bubonic plague made its appearance. During the past seven years this dread disease has ravaged India in spite of the expenditure of much

money by the government and of substantial aid by missions and missionaries. I have often dreaded the time when it would reach Bahrein which I felt sure it would since there is no sanitary precaution. The chief and his native advisers are ignorant of the advantages of segregation, quarantine and of modern methods of treatment, and prejudiced against many of these things by reason of their religion.



OPERATING ROOM IN BAHREIN HOSPITAL.

Shortly after the plague broke out some of our enemies did their best to spread reports that the Christians had poisoned wells etc., and these reports gained credence for a time. However, the testimony of those who were benefited and God's blessing on our efforts, are restoring confidence and we believe the pestilence will yet prove a blessing to the work.

The following report on the plague which I prepared for the Indian Government will interest you :

May 20, 1903.

J. C. GASKIN, Esq.,  
H. M. Asst. Pol. Agent,  
Bahrein.

Dear Sir :

In accordance with your request I beg to present the following brief report on the epidemic of Bubonic Plague prevailing at this time in Bahrein.

Before doing so, however, I feel that in justice to myself I should say that I am not in possession of the exact information and statistics that I need, because of lack of aid and support from the proper authorities in securing the same, and of the unreliability of reports secured from even the best native sources.

I have drawn my conclusions and information partly from personal experience and partly from sifted reports from native sources.

The first case of plague seen by me was on April 26th, but I had heard of a case with similar symptoms a day or two before.

In the beginning it seemed of a very virulent type, most victims dying within forty-eight hours of the appearance of the first symptoms, but during the last week it seems to have diminished in virulence and numerous spontaneous recoveries are reported. I believe some of these are bona fide recoveries but that the majority of such reported cases are of doubtful diagnosis.

There have also been quite a number of cases of *Pestis Siderans* reported, but I believe that in most of these cases fright is an important factor, death occurring where no other symptoms than a slight fever appeared. I have found weak hearts very prevalent here and this fact, combined with the very emotional nature of the natives, I believe accounts for some of the early and sudden deaths that are unaccompanied by grave symptoms.

The disease has been much more prevalent among the Shiahs than among the Sunnis, and more especially among a certain class of the former, viz., those of the Hassa type. This can probably be accounted for by their more unhygienic mode of living, and the filthiness and dampness of the district in which they live.

The disease seems to be confined to the village of Menamah to date. Cases have been reported in two other villages but the

reports are not altogether reliable, and if there have been sporadic cases elsewhere it has not become epidemic as yet, although there is no reason why it should not spread in every direction as no precautions are taken to prevent the spread of the disease and no practical restrictions are attempted.

From April 30th to date I have placed the average daily mortality of Menamah at twenty-five, and about one-half of these deaths are from plague.

There does not seem to be a decrease as yet in the number of deaths although, as I said before, the epidemic seems to have become milder with the recent rise of temperature in Bahrein.

I beg also to call your attention to the manner of burial practiced in the cemetery near the Hospital, where I have had the opportunity of observing hundreds of burials, and find that they are burying in graves from three to four feet deep only. They also bury in the midst of the very crowded cemetery where they often, in digging the graves, throw up bones of former burials. Either or both of these customs will keep us in a constant menace of future epidemics after this one is over.

I beg to remain,

Your obedient servant,

S. J. THOMS, M.D.

## THE COLPORTER PROBLEM.

REV. JOHN VAN ESS.

In proportion as a mission to Moslems is efficient in its colportage work, in that proportion is it successful.

This may seem a simple solution of the vexed Moslem problem, but it seems to me entirely warranted by the facts. He who studies the Word of God readily agrees that as a means of grace it has peculiar efficacy, not only in breaking down false doctrine, but in formulating and fortifying the true. And even only a primitive knowledge of Mohammedanism will show that when we take away from it its own Koran and substitute the Bible, we turn

into channels already prepared by an all-absorbing love for external authority, the pure water of life. Therefore its efficient propagation calls to its aid all the power and wisdom of God Himself.

But this does not simplify the vexed problem. If mere circulation were sufficient, dollars and cents would soon bring in the kingdom. It is *efficient* colportage that is needed. And so the whole matter has an intensely personal side.



ELIAS BAKKUS, COLPORTER.

1st. *The colporter must himself be an Oriental*, he alone understands the Oriental mind, thinks along the same lines, and knows how to present the truth, so that it will appeal to scoffer, inquirer and confessor.

To this must be added the fact that he is familiar with the language and has a proficiency in it which the foreigners can never hope to attain.

2nd. *He must himself be intensely spiritual*. And there is the great difficulty. He must eliminate from his work the idea that to it are attached so many rupees of salary. He must be deeply



convinced of the dignity of his position and of the dignity of the Word which he is attempting to spread. If it were our aim to fatten statistics and to give a lengthy list of book sales, we would not hesitate to employ Moslems for this work. With a conscience as wide as their capacious trousers and an all-absorbing love for money, the Moslem can in one day dispose of more gospels than the faithful Christian colporter could in ten.

But he does not realize the meaning and power of that which he carries, in fact he perverts it in order to sell it, and so there that ends.

The spiritually minded colporter needs, therefore, a deep conviction of that which he presents as God's own message, which can and will do all that it promises. This encourages him to seek to gain for it an opening, and for this end to endure all the persecution and all the reviling which he so often meets.

He must love the Word and love those to whom he tries to sell it. He must be willing to devote time and energy to the despised black as well as to the proud Arab or the jealous Turk. This requires much faith. As a rule the only available men for this work are those who have spent all their lives in a small Christian community, as for example, at Mardin or Mosul, surrounded by Moslems.

Therefore it is not strange to hear *occasionally* from a colporter's lips the statement that it is all a useless work, that God does not will the salvation of Mohammedans but will let them die in their ignorance and sins.

3rd. *He must have peculiar mental ability.* This, of course, from the nature of those he meets. The lowly negro who knows only the bazaar talk, and whose only multiplication table has money values for its units, and whose mind is degraded by long slavery, needs the story of the Cross in its primitive simplicity. The proud Arab, too, must be rightly approached. Due respect must be paid to his grey beard, to his notions of propriety, to his reverence for all that is sanctioned by custom. The bigoted Mullah must be met with an equal show of strength and with an equal self-confidence, although in true humility.

And after the work has attained its end this self-same colporter must know how to build up the new convert in the faith, must

be ready to help his difficulties and suggest lines of progress in faith and life. Such is the colporter problem. Do you wonder that progress is slow?

The Arabian Mission has been fortunate to a degree in its selection of native workers. Its staff of colporters now numbers nine. They are nearly all spiritual men and satisfactorily intellectual. Some surpass others. Yet it is only very occasionally that we are blessed by the coming of a man like the lamented Kamil Abd-el Messiah, who could repeat the Koran word for word and confound the Mullahs out of their own scriptures because he had learned them from his childhood. When God sees fit to give us more converts of like stamp, or like the beloved Ameen at Bahrein, we shall doubly rejoice. That result however is to be brought about by the native Christian helpers who are now so faithfully serving us in spreading the Word and in exemplifying it in life and conduct.

Pray for them, brethren and sisters, and so pray for the great Moslem problem.

## THE ARABIAN MISSION AT HOME.

REV. FRED. J. BARNY.

What constitutes the Arabian Mission at home? Certainly not the missionaries who come home on furlough. Speaking for myself, my only home is in Arabia where God has set me to work, and I think I speak for all our missionaries. Nor is the Mission at home the Officers and Trustees located at 25 East 22d Street, New York City. They are the executive officers, the go-betweens between the missionaries on the field and the home force,—that body of God's servants we sometimes loosely call "our supporters." God has set this Reformed Church as a lever to raise Arabia out of the slough of Moslem vice and ignorance and death to the status of a Christian people. The long end of the lever is here at home, you our yoke-fellows in the work,—the Board is the fulcrum, and we on the field are the short end of the lever. It is

one whole mechanism through which the power of God may be operative, and we want our friends and supporters to realize this fully. The more we missionaries and you "at home" realize this oneness the better God will use us to His glory in Arabia.

Now, it has been my privilege, while here on furlough, to help develop this lever by visiting the churches and telling them about our work. As this letter is also to be a report of work done, I may state that I have visited ninety-four churches and spoken 130 times on the work. I was away from home nearly every Sunday and usually once or twice during the week, and now I am finishing a five weeks' tour among our German churches in the West. In fact, the circumstances in which I am writing this are fairly characteristic of my furlough. I am in a railway depot waiting for a train due at midnight, and my only chance to complete it will be in hours thus redeemed. Friends have often protested to me about the way in which missionaries spend their furloughs, which are presumably seasons of recuperation and rest. And I must confess that, occasionally, a rebellious spirit rose within me when waiting for a train in some dingy depot, or being jostled along in a train over an unbalanced road-bed, but it was only temporary. Not a bit of it remained when before the audience, and now, near the end, I say decidedly—it was worth all the trouble, and I would gladly do it again with double the trouble.

It would be impossible to detail experiences, though I must refer to the privilege of attending the missionary days of six of these German churches. *Missionfest* they call it, when the whole congregation gives a whole day to celebrating the Lord's kingdom by having a feast of sermons and by giving, and oh! how they give!

In general, I am glad to say that I found a lively interest in our work wherever I went. I want to thank those friends in whose homes I have had the privilege of being entertained. It was pleasant for the Lord's sake and His work to be received into your homes and made to feel "at home." And though, by necessity, the hours of communion were short, your kindness and sincerity assured me that the cement of Christian fellowship and friendship was firmly set. I can go back to Arabia with many a new element of strength and comfort because of you. And so, in

a more general way,—if the many in the churches by a handshake and word have said that they have been benefited by my presence among them, I say the benefit is mutual. I will start for Arabia in September with a larger confidence and hopefulness because of you, that part of the Arabian Mission at home I have been with.

I close with two requests,—one to the Arabian Mission at home. Give us your sons and daughters for this work. Get more of the lever under this rock of Islam and even you in your day will see it move. The other is to those of our Church whom I cannot address thus. Are you doing right in holding aloof from this work? Do but look into this matter and I look for but one result.



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